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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the ideas people hold about teaching literary genres are out-of-date, that fictions of the imagination have been taken over by the media, which turn everything into entertainment and do not allow reflection. Student narratives are suggested as a way of incorporating personal narrative as a literary genre in order to create opposition to the prevalence of media. The student narrative genre is considered in this paper as an appropriate one for beginning the process of critical engagement between experience and culture. Several examples of student narratives are included to illustrate this thesis. (MKM)

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LITERARY CULTURE, MEDIA CULTURE, STUDENT CULTURE

Peter Moss

This talk will be revolutionary, both paradigmatically and syntagmatically; at the macro-level and at the micro-level; as a narrative and as a discourse; as a discontinuity in the genre tradition of this conference and as a type of communicative event.

That is not a bad start in itself, is it? And you'll have noted that I use most of the decade's post-literary terminology, examples of meta-languages which, paradoxically, in their rush to explain how their codes would reveal the way to concrete understanding of society and its cultural forms, instead pushed us further back to a greater cushioned dependence upon convention and tradition, on the one hand; and impelled us further into the profoundly non-traditional abstractions of mass media, on the other. However, what this decade of languages has demonstrated is that literature, in the traditional way in which we have understood it, and still do practice it in our classrooms, is dead. The basic genres and their conventions, with which we have concerned ourselves this week, no longer are widely used by professional writers nor are they any longer regarded as necessary, irreducible forms, by book publishers. We have only to consider the new 'genres' of this century - streams of consciousness, anti-novels, autobiographical novels; found poems, concrete poems; some of modern theatre's near-silences. You take my point. It is not too difficult to argue that literature has become dissociated from the larger society which consumes it. Jonathon Culler gives us a small clue as to why this might have occurred. He argues that literature works because people have a "literary competence" analogous to the ability of native

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speakers to understand sentences framed in their native language. This competence only works, optimally, I suppose, when it relates to familiar codes. Late-twentieth-century literature, with its incoherencies and privateness; its emphasis upon despair; its determined imprecision and lack of a common-sense reflection of human affairs, all these distort or confuse the codes. The makers of literature in this century, with a few exceptions, have turned their backs on the realities of men in society. Industrialism, which literature as we think of it, opposed, produced new fictions based upon the internal necessity of its own technologies. Television, Radio, Advertising, movies, mystery and adventure novels; these are the modern fictions which literature has turned its back upon. And our professional world has been torn between the two cultures. In the process, our practice is in disarray because the confusion of voices, themselves reflections of the dynamics of social and cultural change, has prevented the mind from settling upon anything which might hold out some hope of bridging the 'cultures'.

I take it that we all believe it necessary to engage the social and educational discontinuities in the western world in order to help our students develop some control over their own lives and over the codes of post-industrial media culture.

I want, therefore, to examine for a moment some aspects of post industrial media fictions which get in the way of so much that we hope and try to do for students.

The most potent fiction-making process is that whereby the media turn everything into entertainment, sometimes dramatic entertainment. There are a number of consequences of this structuring principle of entertainment. Firstly, it denies Memory. As

substitute, all media usurp certain literary conventions (irony upon irony!) and create semiotic conventions based upon mounting repetitions; songs, advertisements, programme situations, character stereotypes breathlessly new and age-less because replaceable and endlessly replaced. Underneath the surface newness everything is the same, even News. (A recent and well-received National Australian Broadcasting programme, surveying and summarising the decade of the 70's, began each yearly segment of recordings with a scene-setting catalogue of disaster. The following,year - introductions show neatly that contemporary history, media-style, has become dramatic entertainment, a re-lived suspense .....)

1973 President Nixon denied all knowledge of Watergate; Vice President Agnew resigned in disgrace; Lyndon Baines Johnson died; so did Noel Cowerd, Pablo Picasso and David Ben Gurron. France exploded a nuclear device at Muratoa Atol; war broke out between Israel and Egypt; the Allende government was overthrown in Chile ...

1975 1975 was the year of constitutional crisis in Australia. It was a year for notable deaths - Chiang Kai Chek, P.G. Wodehouse, Harile Selassi, General Franco, Julian Huxley. Ms. Ghandi declared a state of emergency in India ...

1976 In 1976 the bloody riots in the black township of Soweto near Johannesburg, were closely followed by the return from exile to Rhodesia, of Bishop Abel Musarewa. Princess Margaret and Lord Snowden announced their separation. Vietnam was officially re-unified; and Israel carried out a daring rescue of its citizens at Entebbe Airport in Uganda. Ulricha Meinhoff, one of the most feared urban guerrillas in Europe, committed suicide in prison. The year took its toll of famous people, Chou En Lai, Agatha Christie, Paul Robeson, etc.

That morbid agenda of social and political comment suggests, with a depressing terseness, how so-called serious programmes obliterate the need for memory. The medium's own signs, quickly learnt by

the regular audience, develop a programmed recognition of events and their multi-layered fictions make memory, with its attendant private skill of selecting the significant detail, redundant.

I've dealt with this aspect of media because the denial of the faculty of memory, central as it is is to media logic, works against a central humanising tendency which many of us find in the literature which we personally value. The novel, at its best, allows the reader two gifts. Firstly, complicity in a full, complex world of motive and action. To enjoy fully and to appreciate strongly the realisations of that interplay the reader needs memory in the basic sense of recollection and recall. There is also a more profound memory function in novel-reading - that which allows the reader to interpret silence.* The narrative structure in the novel is a way of talking about the world but that structure can also force the reader to reflect upon what is not said. There are junctures in all novels when the author, in a sense, stops narrating, when he steps aside and allows the text to stand alone, to speak for itself almost. At those junctures, a sub-genre is imposed on the narrative, not monologue (the text speaking for itself) but dialogue with silence (the reader engaging with things un-said). Let me demonstrate this by reading this short passage from 'Middlemarch':

> "Bulstrode, who knew that his wife had been out and had come in saying that she was not well, had spent the time in an agitation equal to hers. He had looked forward to her learning the truth from others, and had acquiesced in that probabiltiy, as something easier to him than any confession. But now that he imagined the moment of her knowledge come, he awaited the result in anguish. His daughters had been obliged to consent to leave him, and though he had allowed some food to be brought to him, he had not touched it.

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*See, The Silence of the Novel, part 2, by John Preston, Modern Languages Review, Vol. 74, April, 1979.

He felt himself perishing slowly in unpitied misery. Perhaps he should never see his wife's face with affection in it again. And if he turned to God there seemed to be no answer but the pressure of retribution.

It was eight o'clock in the evening before the door opened and his wife entered. He dared not look up at her. He sat with his eyes bent down, and as she went towards him she thought he looked smaller - he seemed so withered and shrunken. A movement of new compassion and old tenderness went through her like a great wave, and putting one hand on his which rested on the arm of the chair, and the other on his shoulder, she said, solemnly but kindly -

"Look up, Nicholas".

He raised his eyes with a little start and looked at her half amazed for a moment: her pale face, her changed, mourning dress, the trembling about her mouth, all said, "I know", and her hands and eyes rested gently on him. He burst out crying and they cried together, she sitting at his side. They could not yet speak to each other of the shame which she was bearing with him, or of the acts which had brought it down on them. His confession was silent, and her promise of faithfulness was silent. Open-minded as she was, she nevertheless shrank from the words which would have expressed their mutual consciousness, as she would have shrunk from the flakes of fire. She could not say, "How much is only slander and false suspicion?" and he did not say, "I am innocent".

Eliot seems to consciously invite the reader to make the silent dialogue by that first paragraph which, though setting the scene for the interview, gives the reader a feeling of being suspended rather than being drawn into what ought to be a profoundly relational dramatic episode. In the harrowing colloquoy which follows the only spoken words are Mrs. Bulstrode's "Look up Nicholas" itself an almost graphic sign to the reader, forcing us to create for the characters, expression, gesture, bodily stance. For the rest, Eliot's stark, actual, yet dense, moral sketch is a theatre of shadows and silence into which the reader pours dialogue out of his own judgements - yes - but also out of his own private social and moral histories - lightning flashes on blankness. And those ligtening/ flashes are unprepared; are reflections of spontaneous engagement at the moment of reading. But they reflect a personal structuring out of deep memory.

You'll have pot my point. In order to partake in that silent dialogue the reader needs much more than the signs of the print-medium. He needs a moral and private universe, bristling with doubts and certainties, in order to meet and contend the narrative hiatus. Those doubts and certainties are offshoots of human experience learnt in life and through the energy of thought. The supple transformations on reality, which memory makes, are made possible through the variousness of experience, accompanied by a coherent and steady sense of self.

Media, which obliterate social variousness and the solid sense of private character in favour of the conventions of sameness and the general signs of interchangeable experience, produce in the teaching context the potential, increasing as the years pass, for dislocation at the engaging-points in the growing, mind of adolescence.

The second tendency of the Entertainment principle of media is that which incorporates private experience into the world of media events. This is a subtle matter because the evidence, whilst easy to define and locate, is nonetheless slippery of apprehension in media contexts - slippery because so much happens around single events. Before one can settle on a developing attitude; a feel of sympathy; a moment of insight, the situation is obliterated as the next item demands our attention (There are no silences in the technological media).

I'll illustrate this view of incorporation with two straightforward examples from widespread radio methods which have connections with our interests in literary texts.

My first example is taken from a standard Current Affairs interview. It is between a retired missionary-lady and an ABC reporter discussing the plight of Aborigines in an area of Queensland.

Part A
Presenter

While the Arakun Aborigines continue their battle with the Queensland Government one Woman who, perhaps knows better than most Australians, fears that unless they win they might die out. For 40 years, until 1965, Mrs. Geraldine McKenzie worked as a missionary with her husband, Bill, and they were, at the time of their arrival in 1925, some of the first white people to meet the Arakun Aborigines. Mrs. McKenzie told some of her experiences to Peter Jefferson.

A Mrs. McKenzie how well do you know the people in Arakun; how close did you become to them in 40 years as a missionary?

Mrs.
McKenzie

I think I got very close to them when we went away from the mission station, and lived in the bush. We did that twice in our early years. We went on horse-back down the Reserve, there was no other way to go then there were no aeroplanes to fly about in. We didn't dream of aeroplanes 50 years ago. And we went on horseback and we camped in their camps with them; went hunting with them on a wallaby drive and we went fishing and we had wonderful camps with them on the Gulf Beach in the moonlight and shared the fish and the turtle which they had been hunting.

B Can you describe the relationship? What did you talk about? What were you interested most in?

Mrs.
McKenzie

Well, I was most interested in getting them to talk to me about the way they looked at things, they're the things I remember. Now, we know in their wild state that they went nude, and many people thought they were shameless. But they had their own Mrs. Grundy, I discovered ... Some old woman had come in from the bush and I said, What's she like"? My informant said, She is a very poor old woman, mother, she's very strict with us young women. When we sit with her and she sees a young man coming she say's, "young women! look down, there's a young man coming".

Part B

C Well, if we can come to the present day though, How well do you think Mr. Bjelke-Peterson is faring with the aboriginals. Do you think his approach is the right approach based on your experience there?

Mrs. McKenzie

No. I wouldn't think it was, because he won't listen to them. He's got his own ideas about things.

D How do you personally feel about the negotiation and the confrontations that's going on up there at the moment?

Mrs. McKenzie

I fell very troubled and I do hope things come out right for the aborigines because I feel that it could be genocide for them ... if they don't die physically, they'll die mentally ... spiritually ... their lives won't be worth living.

E These are very strong words though. That's a very strong prediction to make, isn't it?

Mrs. McKenzie

Yes, but it has been made before, I'm not the first to make it. I didn't just think it up myself.

F But how would that happen?

Mrs. McKenzie

An aboriginal has something in his make up that we haven't got. They even say, "I'm going to die!" And they do die.

G And that could happen?

Mrs. McKenzie

Ithink it could, yes, (long pause) Perhaps not to every one, but to many and to some of the best of them.

The lady embarks on a personal narrative which is interesting in itself (it holds us because it is full of sharp, if understated, detail) and which allows the reader/listener to engage the silences. silences akin to that which the novel makes.* But her private,

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* The difference between these silences and the ones I analysed earlier is that between dramatic narrative (we fill in the possible events on the beach in the moonlight and the details of talk and dialectic among the young women after being admonished by the elder one) and moral discourse (in Middlemarch).

recollected narrative, located in authentic, lived experience is too potent for the ephemeral drama of the medium. The journalist abruptly forces her to change direction - "Well, if we can come to the present day, though"... In his 'D' question he reactivates the presenter's enquiry of a sensational interview by using the directing word "confrontation", which triggers the lady's troubled concern and her genocide speculation. The journalist has now got what we wants and he endeavours to keep her focussed on that abstract drama. Segments (E.F.G.).

The attempt at incorporation is obvious but, blessedly, this lady makes her presence felt to the end. Her last comment has a chilling, echoing finality about it which brings the listener hard up against the authenticity of one woman's experience. The incorporation has not fully succeeded because the centre of the lady's narrative is defined by a special knowledge and by sources of feeling which the medium cannot completely overlay with the inauthentic, engineered drama of either conflict or of rhetorical tension.*

My second example is from the Talk-Back format and it represents the 'heaven' and the 'hell' of that genre.

Caller: I'd like to talk about Patrick Steptoe. He was my gynaecologist in the U.K. And I know there's going to be a lot of criticism about this man and what he's done. But I would like people to know that he's not only a brilliant gynaecologist but he's a great human being.

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* A good example of the way this lady's narrative conforms to aspects of literary narrative is the pause in her final contribution. It is a silence which both invites audience to make narrative and which confirms her own commitment. It is a space of text where words cannot grow, a movement of terrible vision (for her) at the edge of the unknown. Radio and Television never invite that kind of complicity in the Audiences.

Host Why would there be a lot of adverse or critical comment?

C Well, I think there already has. I heard on the news this morning that certain people are criticisng him - Churchmen and things like this.

Host Well, I don't know - uh - you know, Churches can't play God anymore than gynaecologists can play God.

C No, they can't. But also there was a comment from a spokesman in London. He seemed to think that the $1000,000 dollars that was spent could have been spent curing people. But surely, this is a cure too. There are thousands of women that really will bless him for this. And he has so much thought for his patients. I don't think he did this as an experiment. Knowing the man as I did, I think that he would be upset having to tell so many women that they would never be able to have children. And I think that he would do this just to help these people.

H. Can I pry a little bit and ask you your troubles that took you to this particular gynaecologist, were they the same as this?

C No. They weren't the same. I just had operations. That's all. Under him. But I saw him with his patients and he really felt for them, you know? (Some surgeons, they just treat you as animals). But he really cared for his patients. I've seen him many times, when he couldn't help anyone, almost in tears. And I think this is the reason that he did it. It wasn't for publicity, or experimental reasons at all. And I'd like people to know this before they start criticizing.

H. Well, I'm glad you called.

C. Thank you. Would you play a request for that's so appropriate.

H. Of course.

C. 'Dream the Impossible Dream'.

This represents the 'heaven' of the type because it is quite typical of a kind of Radio which offers anonymous people the opportunity to make narrative, or text or cultural meanings. This lady is attempting to share personal and cultural judgements out of her own past experience and in that cont ext her contributions represent a particular kind of narrative (The Experience-Tale for didactic ends). You will have noticed that the host plays little part in the interaction; the caller systematically creates the text.

Her final contribution, the 'hell' of the narrative, however, has the effect of placing over her earlier comments a cloud of doubt as to the authenticity of the impulse behind the creation of the text. That 'show-biz' reflex makes us re-direct our gaze back at the text in order to reassess. That reflex provides the listener/reader with the code to read the whole narrative. It is the entertainment code-of-human-sentimentality. Every speech of the lady has a coded focus/an indicator which gives us a connotative structure of feeling. In sequence, the crucial comments are,

"... but he's a great human being";
"And he has so much thought for his patients";
"... and he really felt for them, you know";
"I've seen him many times ... almost in tears";
"... play a request for me that's so appropriate".

Obviously it is not possible to claim that Radio or T.V. codes are responsible for this lady's significant language but it is a narrative that mixes in such a relaxed way, media culture and private experience, that one can be confident of the potency of the contribution which the public media culture must have made to the lady's private meanings.

Let me pause in order to confirm what you are all thinking about: I've accepted that for people at large, the idea, which we hold about literature, is dead; that the fictions of the imagination have been overtaken by the fictions of media; that within those fictions a place has been created for individuals to present their own texts; and that media attempt to incorporate private, individual experience into their predominant fiction, that of the categorical culture-imperative of entertainment. In the final section of this talk I want to present some ideas about literature and about how we might incorporate personal narrative as a literary genre - of value

in its own right, but essentially in order to create a necessary opposition to the incorporations of media.

For most of this week we have discussed the classic-type genre literature even though our teaching practices introduce other kinds of texts - journals, diaries, probably speech-genres as well. Why is it that we have so naturally accepted the conventional categories as marking the perimeter of our field? The answer is probably that conventional literary genres have been institutionalized as a cultural mode and it is because they exist in this way that they function as writing models. In particular, readers develop expectations of what constitutes 'literary writing' and these expectations come about through school; corporate business decisions, in the selections which publishing houses decide to promote; even through social gossip. institutionalization of cultural modes implies a close fit between an historical phase and the broad cultural objects which reflect the particular era's 'inevitable' shape.

If we take the development of the novel as the locus classicus of modern literary history in its relation to industrial society (and impressive theories have been developed which trace various routes of that connection), then we have to ask the question, given the facts of twentieth century literary form, "What are the genres appropriate for post-industrial culture or post-industrial media culture? Even to begin the process of answering this question I shall have to make a large assumption of value - that, making narratives, sometimes fictional ones is an important part of individual psychic life and collective social life and that this impulse is directly related in some way to the values and concerns of society.

It is possible to argue that a central tendency in post-industrial culture is for the ideology of consumerism to be self-policing i.e.* the fictions and the narratives which frame them (things like advertising copy, which represent dream; both the connotative language of Radio Current Affairs and the semiotic codes of T.V. Newsreels, which represent reality) are capable of creating, servicing, controlling not only their own nature and growth but also important value-reflexes of Audience. You'll note that I include in Consumerism not merely product diffusion, and the creation of want, but also the creation of a need for drama-in-everyday life, as determined by the media dissemination of selected cultural and political events.** Within 'the drama-of-everyday-life' a very important development has taken place which is a direct result of popular mass communications. This has been the transformation of the potential-for-Drama in society. The centres of tension have moved away from the personal; the local and the traditional to a range of things presented in various and shifting formal categories. Of course, the dramatic potential has enormously increased. Indeed, in our current cultural phase we are led relentlessly to the conclusion that Life is Drama viz.

(i) The daily newspaper headline bill-boards which litter the streets, couched unchangingly in the language of resounding extremes,

(ii) The seductive imperatives of shop-front advertising

(iii) The theatrical and dramatic scenes of T.V. and radio copy, especially for beauty treatments.

(iv) Soap Operas and thrillers

(v) Debates between political opponents; between establishment figures and particular pressure groups.

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* See Frederic Jameson, Ideology, Narrative Analysis and Popular Culture, Theory and Society, 4, 1977, pp. 543-559.

** This self-policing tendency can also be seen in the 'Culture Arts' in the nexus between event and, say, book; its corporate financial sponsorship; its production or publication; the film of the book/ book of the T.V. series/song of the month/beautiful people event of the decade, who, themselves, help to create the Audience desire for more facts of art.

(vi) The nightly lists of news items.

(vii) The frisson of wondering whether you will be declared redundant next week.

The point about all this is that Experience is dissolved to the surface shape of the sub-genres (above), and is fixed by the dramatic imperative. In consequence, personal experience is, by implication, denied significance and that, in broad cultural terms, means that the words of individuals are denied significance; and that eventually reduces us to silence. I want, therefore, to make a plea for our creating a new 'genre' for serious study - that of student narratives. This 'genre' is an appropriate one for beginning the process of critical engagement between experience and culture.

I have a very simple and practical reason for suggesting that this might be a sensible way of reducing the size of that large group of students who don't respond with ease to our literary verities; and that is, that for adolescents in Urban society, anyway, what sociologist call Reference groups and Membership groups are more important than any other social mix.

A more complex reason is that there is so much impressive written and spoken narrative which adolescents make that it behoves us to take it seriously and to use it structurally in our programmes. I use the word 'structural' because I believe that such material should be an important component, and I think that there is, potentially, sufficient variety in the 'genre' for it to be a building block. My own view about these kinds of texts is that they are valuable in their own right, often are examples of moving, occasionally profound, personal or cultural statements and that any teacher worth

his or her salt should be able to use them with the large majority of students at appropriate phases in adolescent development and at sympathetic junctures within the learning environment of all classrooms.

In the past there has been a tendency to disparage personal narratives, private writings, because they have been viewed by many as merely emotional outpourings. I acknowledge the truth of that fact and shout, "hooray" - if adolescents can write about their feelings then we've ideal material to teach from and, eventually, to turn into more varied ranges. But, that aside, I can accept the force of that criticism, at least for the available evidence of ten years ago. The evidence, now, is very different, much more various and, at one level, and sadly so, more complex.

What I have been able to detect over the past few years is a much more aware view of the world in a lot of students' writing, an awareness of social and cultural complexity which I find astonishing, yes, but indicative of knowledge of contemporary culture and even an internalization of media styles and the ability to use them with point. And this opens up a fascinating possibilty for us. The narratives which I shall present offer clear, if tentative, indicators of a literary form which does illustrate the fit between an historical phase and the cultural objects which reflect the period's shape. These narratives have all the elements of media culture, elements which entice into easy acceptance but all hold firm to the things which media try constantly to dissolve or to incorporate - the points of tension between private experience and social or cultural wider worlds. In a sense these narratives present us with growing-points of literature and, more importantly, offer unique opportunities for students response because the genre material is 'coded' by adolescent universals and is recognised by them.

I'll quickly show you what I mean. First, a piece form ten years ago, a found letter in the most literal sense (an anonymous letter accidentally found, placed in the back of text book.)

Dear Folks:

Thank you for everything, but I am going to Chicago and try and start some kind of new life.

You asked me why I did those things and why I gave you so much trouble, and the answer is easy for me to give you, but I am wondering if you will understand.

Remember when I was about six or seven and I used to want you to just listen to me? I remember all the nice things you gave me for Christmas and my birthday, and I was real happy with the things for about a week at the time I got the things, but the rest of the time during the year I really didn't want presents. I just wanted all the time for you to listen to me like I was somebody who felt things. But you said you were busy.

Mom, you are a wonderful cook, and you had everything so clean, and you were so tired so much from doing all those things that made you busy; but you know something, Mom? I would have liked crackers and peanut butter just as well - if you had only sat down with me a little while during the day and said to me: "Tell me all about it so I can maybe help you understand".

And when Donna came I couldn't understand why everyone made so much fuss because I didn't think it was my fault that her hair is curly and her teeth so white, and she doesn't have to wear glasses with thick lenses. Her grades were better, too, weren't they?

If Donna ever has any children, I hope you will tell her to just pay some attention to the one who doesn't smile very much because that one will really be crying inside. And when she's about to bake six dozen cookes to make sure first that the kids don't want to tell her about a dream or a hope or something, because thoughts are important too to small kids, even though they don't have so many words to use when they tell about what they have inside them.

I think that all the kids who are doing so many things that grownups are tearing out their hair worrying about are really looking for somebody that will have time to

listen a few minutes and who really and truly will treat them as they would a grown-up who might be useful to them. You know - polite to them. If you folks had ever said to me, "Pardon me", when you interrupted me, I'd have dropped dead.

If anybody asks you where I am, tell them that I've got a lot of things I want to talk about.

Love to all,

Your Son.

It is a piece which looks back and reviews certain events. It holds our attention, at least superficially, because it locates examples in the familiar and because the personality projected is that of the ordinary-insignificant, a loser, but not a defeated loser. But the sense of self is seen only as an object acted upon either by people or by accident. All the felt cliches of adolescence are present,

"I was somebody who felt things"

"Start some new kind of life"

"I couldn't understand"

"that one will really be crying inside"

"treat ... as they would a grown up"

but it is feeling in a vacuum. Despite the familiar objects there is no sense of place or time. It is a fair early-version* of media melodrama, but superior, and more authentic to the human world because the writer is choosing his own resolution of the tensions.

Compare that with a poem written 3 weeks ago by a fourteen year old boy, a "low-achiever", unmotivated, silent.

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* It is also a special kind of dialogue with silence, a dialogue with the generalized-other' of G.H. Mead. See Mind, Self and Society, Chicago, 1934.

The Computer Age

The computer age is here,
They will soon control the world.
Clicking, Ticking, Buzzing all the time,
Taking the role of man,
the inventor of the technological scrap of metal.
It goes straight to the point,
no hesitation.
just giving out complex sentences.

I don't know what I'll do with my life,
get married, be a husband, and have a wife.
I hope I have the courage to win,
and pass my thoughts to the children,
if I live to tell them.

Will I have a job,
this I do not know.
A doctor takes care of your head,
A policeman catches crooks,
The undertaker takes care of the dead,
An author writes books.
A jeweller sells watches and rings,
An artist paints pictures,
An inventor makes things,
A vet takes care of nursing bitches.
but I can't do these things.

Will I be a bludger,
Doing nothing all the time,
resting in happiness when I take some dope,
Or will I be a Psychopath
and put my head in the noose of a rope.
Killing myself without fear.

The country is corrupt.
They don't let me see the government,
so I can do something about this corrupt world.
They say I'm trying to conspire,
no talking, no letters, no phonecalls,
until I retire,
Into the world of no return.

Life is not worth living,
the ultimate war is sure to begin,
when it does, all will join.
Bombs will be dropped,
guns will be fired,
All because of greed for wealth and power.
There we shall fight,
There we shall die,
No-one will survive.
Only the computers will be left,
and when they have the knowledge of God,
The Adam and Eve story will start again.

That bleak world-vision composed within this boy's silence, impelled by a jarring psyche, and despite the surface awkwardnesses and reflexes of adolescent despair, is a narrative of cultural power because it confronts our powerlessness. The human world he depicts is recognizably our world 'though I suggest that his realisation of contemporary gadgetry is sharper and more tough ly ironic than many of the views which we hold.

Finally, a British example, already published, which some of your will know.

Well, I mean, he had the chance didn't he?

Elsie sits with her curlers in
Putting out her cigarette in the greasy tea which slops
Around the soggy biscuit in the cheap and chipped saucer

'Billy'
She shouts.
(she's reading the paper
digging her ear
adjusting her straps
slicking the ash
[whose powdered waste drifts and glides down
into the dog's water bowl])
'You're not sitting down here like that
Go and wash your hands.'

Albert comes,
Pushing Billy as he makes his weary exodus
and playing a rasping tune on his chin-stubble
he scrapes the sweat from under his arm
so it mingles with the dirt in his fingernails.
Sitting down he complains
'That boy is like a dust-bin
I don't know who he gets it from.'

As Billy washes the soap to wash himself
He remembers that today is his big day. Today Billy is going to the Youth Employment Office where he will be offered all kinds of good jobs and worthwhile employment for a growing lad of fifteen at secondary modern school. You know the sort, electrician's mate, butcher boy, plumber's assistant. All good stuff. It's not so much the lack of interesting jobs that's bad as the gnawing feeling of why he's in the position he's in. It's not his fault is it?

Meanwhile .....

Way down yonger, in Woodford Green
Daddy mixes drinks for the social machine
Which turns so properly, just how it's done
'Gin, Cynthia, darling, oh do have some'.

'Where's Anthony,' says Mummy, 'Where IS that boy?'
'I did so want him to meet Julie and Roy'
'Oh here's the car now, quiet everyone,
This is Anthony - our son.'

Oh hasn't he grown said the crowd with a roar
As they showered him with hand shakes and smiles and more,
'Just like his father', one's heard to say,
'No, more like his mother,' 'No, surely not', 'Nay'.

Anthony 'work makes me puffy' Rand
(He's shaken Reginald Maudling's hand)
He's been to Eton, he's been to France
Tonight he's been to another deb's dance.

He's got no need for Y.E.O.'s
He can live how he wants till the money goes,
And that isn't likely so he's all right
What about Billy?*

I don't need to say much about this except that it has layers of possibility for teaching literary styles and effects. Despite his incorporation of other media (the first section must be based upon the novellette/play 'Billy Liar' and the poem is a skilled turning of the bastard-jazz number, 'Way Down Yonder in New Orleans') it is the author who is both subject and style. It is a fine example of what the posh sociologists call praxis (i.e. the creation of private meanings within an awareness of the social world, in an attempt to change that world, or what Richard Hoggart has called, "becoming wise in one's own way"). And, surely this is what literature is all about!

This group of narratives, when taken together, offer starting points for the study of many literary issues. For adolescents they would have a compelling force, and they are not isolated examples ("ve prepared a short anthology of narratives for you just from my own teaching and experience). The teaching potential of such documents resides in the facts that they are about lives being lived; are comtemporary, and they can be literature. I say that they can be because

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* Printed in, The Politics of Literacy. ed. Martin Hoyles, p. 182. Writers and Readers Publishing Corporation, London, 1977.

they are not recognized as such. But we can make them literature simply by saying so. Literature is what we decide it is. These types of narrative are the living bridges to other literature - more conventional and adult literature. They represent important cultural directions for us because they offer a positive response to the democratic challenge - that of establishing a culture that is not only commonly shared but that is commonly made, as well.

Educational institutions must open up private worlds, through the encouragement of Personal Narratives, in order to ensure that the community makes culture. Without the Private Voice, Education and Culture lose in humanity. There are corporate groups, media empires and shamefully educational bureaucracies who will be quite content for such a voice to be stilled.

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